

MADAGASCAR

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were a few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 226,597 square miles and a population of 19.7 million. Although precise official figures were unavailable, approximately half of the population is Christian. There are four main Christian denominations: Roman Catholic, Reformed Protestant Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM), Lutheran, and Anglican. A significant minority of citizens followed traditional indigenous religions.

Muslims constitute slightly less than 10 percent of the population, with strong concentrations in the north and northwest. Native born and ethnic Indians and Pakistanis who immigrated over the past century make up the majority of the Muslims in the country. There is a small number of Hindus among the ethnic Indian population. The country has a very small Jewish population.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The April 2007 constitutional referendum eliminated the explicit separation of church and state, but it did not diminish legal protection for freedom of religion. President Ravalomanana occasionally expressed a desire to transform the country into "a Christian state," however, there was no attempt to establish a state religion, and most believed his comments only indicated a desire to enshrine Christian principles in the day-to-day life of the country. President Ravalomanana's position as a lay vice-president of FJKM generated some allegations that church and state interests are not kept entirely separate, especially as the four leading Christian churches are the primary beneficiaries of government funding for religious institutions. Muslim leaders have noted mosques receive little to no government assistance.

The law mandates that religious organizations register with the Ministry of Interior. By registering, religious organizations acquire the legal status necessary to receive direct bequests and other gifts. To qualify as a religious association, groups must consist of at least 100 members, with an elected administrative council of no more than 9 members, each of whom must be a citizen. If the group's leadership and faithful are foreign (as is the case with the majority of the country's Muslims), they have the right to form an association "reputed to be foreign." Once the association's membership expands to 1,000 members, the administrative council may apply to be officially recognized. The state officially recognizes 9 houses of worship and 109 religious organizations. The Ministry approved eight new religious organizations and no group was denied registration during the reporting period.

Religious organizations that fail to meet the Ministry of Interior's registration requirements are free to register as simple associations. Simple associations do not have the right to receive gifts or hold religious services. If these groups overstep what is allowed for their status, they violate the law and in rare circumstances are subject to legal action. Ministry officials estimated there were more than 1,000 religious organizations in the country operating without official state recognition, including both simple associations and unregistered organizations.

The Government observes Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Assumption, All Saints' Day, and Christmas as national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the

period covered by this report. Numerous religious organizations operated freely in all regions of the country, often disseminating their message through public and private media. Religious organizations were granted free access to state-run media provided that their use constituted a public service. National radio and television feature weekly Muslim programs, and daily 15-minute programs including the call to prayer were featured on national television during the month of Ramadan. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of any religious organizations that were denied free access to state-run media.

In August 2007 following a 2-year ban, the government reopened the New Protestant Church in Madagascar (formerly known as FPVM), now renamed FKFM. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (EURD) remained banned for its failure to meet legal requirements.

On April 30, 2008, the President named Abdou Salame as the new Minister of Civil Services and Labor, the only Muslim cabinet member. Still, some members of the Muslim community stated that the unofficial behavior of certain government officials based on their personal convictions marginalizes the community. They also expressed concern about their legal status in the country.

An arcane system of citizenship laws and procedures has resulted in a pool of stateless persons in the minority Muslim community, many of whom have lived in the country for generations. Reliable figures were unavailable, but Muslim leaders estimated as many as 5 percent of the 2 million Muslims were affected. Citizenship is transmitted through blood; birth on the country's soil does not transmit citizenship. Children born to a Malagasy mother and non-Malagasy father must be declared by a certain age or risk losing eligibility for citizenship. Some members of the Karana community of Indo-Pakistani origin who failed to register for Malagasy or Indian citizenship following India's independence in 1947 were no longer eligible for either. Members of the wider Muslim community suggested that a Muslim-sounding name alone could delay one's citizenship application indefinitely. Lack of citizenship precluded voting rights; lack of a passport limited international travel possibilities.

Some Muslim leaders suggested their ethnic/religious difference sometimes limited access to government services and financial assistance. They expressed reluctance to advertise some of their activities as "Islamic" for fear of discrimination, although there were no reliable reports of explicit discrimination by the Government other than in adjudicating citizenship applications.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were a few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Some Muslims felt they received unequal treatment in schools, hospitals, private businesses, and the work place.

In April 2007 a 20-year-old Muslim student was found decapitated alongside a torn Qur'an in a mosque at the University of Antananarivo. However, a local Muslim leader thought the death had more to do with personal conflicts than religious violence.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government and civil society as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy officials regularly meet with leaders of religious communities, including minority groups.